

US foreign policy**Ukraine feels the chill of Biden's foreign policy**

Afghanistan withdrawal heightens Zelensky's fears of dwindling support from Washington



Volodymyr Zelensky, fourth from left, with troops in the Donbas region. Biden's election initially raised hopes in Kyiv of a more normal relationship after the tumult of the Trump presidency © Ukrainian Presidency/Anadolu Agency/Getty

Roman Olearchyk in Kyiv AUGUST 30 2021

When Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky makes his first White House visit on Wednesday, he will be desperate for military and economic aid to demonstrate that the Biden administration will not abandon his country as it has Afghanistan.

Ukraine has fought an eight-year war against Russia and Russian-backed militants in the Donbas region. Yet even before the chaotic pullout from Kabul, alarm was spreading in Kyiv over fears US president Joe Biden wanted to focus more on other foreign policy issues, especially rivalry with China.

The first warning sign for Kyiv came this spring when Washington, without prior notice, waived further US sanctions on Nord Stream 2. The nearly completed \$11bn Russian gas pipeline, which stretches across the Baltic Sea to Germany, threatens to deprive Ukraine of billions of dollars in transit revenue while making the EU more dependent on Moscow for energy.

Washington has been highly critical of the pipeline but the Biden administration decided to defuse a row with Berlin over its completion. In a July deal, the US gave its tacit approval in return for German promises it would urge Russia to continue pumping gas through Ukraine beyond 2024, and impose sanctions against Moscow if it used gas supplies to threaten US allies.

“America’s commitment to Ukraine’s security is in doubt given everything that has happened in past months, from the US-German NS2 agreement to the debacle in Afghanistan,” an adviser to Zelensky told the Financial Times. “Zelensky is going to want reassurances . . . that the US will not abandon Ukraine.”

Afghanistan and Ukraine pose completely different security considerations for Washington, given its military support for Kyiv is limited to about \$300m annually since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Days ahead of Zelensky’s visit, the White House announced an additional \$60m in military assistance to Ukraine for this year. Even so, in both Kyiv and Moscow, the precipitous US withdrawal from Afghanistan suggests a wavering commitment to its allies.

Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia’s security council, predicted in August that Washington would abandon Ukraine’s pro-western leadership, as it had the Afghan government.

“Was the ousted pro-American regime in Kabul saved by the fact that Afghanistan had the status of a principal US ally outside Nato?” Patrushev said to Russia’s Izvestia newspaper. “A similar situation awaits supporters of the American choice in Ukraine.”

Tymofiy Mylovanov, an adviser to Zelensky’s chief of staff, said: “We are not Afghanistan, we are not a failed state, we fight for our independence and sovereignty . . . Security is paramount. We have done more for security in Europe than many other countries.”

Another person familiar with US-Ukrainian diplomacy said “the message from Ukraine is don’t turn us into Afghanistan, don’t throw us under the bus . . . I think the Americans haven’t been listening”.

Biden’s election initially raised hopes in Kyiv of a more normal relationship and stronger US support after the tumult of Donald Trump’s presidency.

Zelensky, elected in 2019, was denied an early visit to the White House as Trump sought to pressure Kyiv into investigating the Ukrainian business dealings of Biden’s son, Hunter. He also temporarily halted military assistance to Kyiv. These actions triggered Trump’s impeachment.

Trump did, however, provide Ukraine with military aid in the form of Javelin anti-tank missiles. The Obama administration, under which Biden as vice-president led US policy on the Ukraine crisis, had declined to provide weapons fearing Russia would retaliate by escalating hostilities in Donbas. Some 14,000 people have died in the war and it continues to claim combatant and civilian lives each month.

Andy Hunder, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine, said: “Large US investors are watching Zelensky’s White House visit closely because future investment depends on Ukraine’s security situation, geopolitics and assurances it gets from the US in case of further Russian military actions.”

The White House has faced strong bipartisan criticism from lawmakers over the waiver of NS2 sanctions and its agreement with Berlin, which Kyiv claims provides no guarantees. People familiar with the matter said Biden had tried to avoid additional domestic pressure by scheduling Zelensky’s visit for a time when Congress is in recess — as it would be when they meet.

“The burden is on Ukraine to come up with [plans for] practical assistance which the US can provide, and if the Biden administration falls short, then that’s where Congress can help,” said Edward Chow, a senior associate at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

People familiar with Zelensky’s White House visit said the Ukrainian leader would press for a large increase in military aid and for US-guaranteed bond issues to help rebuild its infrastructure and reboot its economy.

“It would be logical to give Ukraine the same level of military and financial support that Afghanistan was receiving since it’s a viable state willing to fight and has liberal democratic values,” said the adviser to Zelensky.

“It’s time for Washington to realise that Ukraine needs tens of billions of dollars in assistance if it is to survive the Russian threat long term,” the adviser added.

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